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I Found a Democratic School, Finally: A Response to "This is What Democracy Looks Like: Some Thoughts on Democratic Schools"

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Abstract

This article is a response to the essay, "This is What Democracy Looks Like: Some Thoughts on Democratic Schools" by James A. Beane, published in Volume 5, Issue 3 of *Middle Grades Review*. The article provides a brief description of the author's time in a private community school founded on democratic practices. He also recalls the interest in democratic schooling instilled by the 1990s movement tied to integrative curriculum. The author believes that it is time to revisit conversations around democratic schools and is hopeful that Beane's article can help stimulate those discussions.

Introduction

During the fall of 2019, I completed a teaching sabbatical at a local, private, Kindergarten through eighth grade community school founded on democratic ideals. I had done some curriculum work with the "Oak Ridge" faculty and students in the past, helping them to develop units using the integrative curriculum process developed by James Beane (1993). After spending a few days with the staff and students, I became intrigued with the kinds of learning that was taking place at Oak Ridge. While I was a little nervous about returning to the day-to-day functions of being a real teacher after a 20-year absence, I asked if they would be open to me using my sabbatical to work with them for a full semester and they graciously said "yes."

Oak Ridge is a K-8 school whose daily functions are managed by three teachers. There are three separate age groups, but the students interact daily for lunch and recess, and periodically work on projects together. Philosophically, the Oak Ridge approach to education closely aligned with the work I did as a middle school teacher in Madison, Wisconsin during the 1990s. Over the years, I have had opportunities to teach and write with a few like-minded classroom teachers, but I never found a school established on democratic principles. The Oak Ridge commitment to empowering students by having them help plan the curriculum matched one of my fundamental beliefs about democratic education – that students should be active participants in what and how they learn. In addition, I liked how Oak Ridge is dedicated to social emotional learning and values the importance of play and recess. The school also promotes community-based education, having established partnerships with an art gallery, an alpaca farm, a day care facility, and a local elderly care facility.

When I returned to campus for the Spring semester, one of my colleagues told me that I needed to check out the latest issue of Middle Grades Review. As a friend and former colleague of James Beane, I was excited to see he was writing again. Just as exciting was the fact that the Middle Grades Review was dedicating the better part of an issue to democracy, especially given my recent experiences at Oak Ridge. If anyone knows anything about democratic schools, it is Jim. And, if ever there seems to be a more necessary time to revive the discussion that democratic schools could emerge from the wreckage caused by decades of the educational "reform" imposed upon public schools, and especially on their curricula, it is now.

I never imagined that public education would come to its current condition. It is difficult for me to realize that it has been over 30 years since Jim Beane, Barbara Brodhagen, Jim Dunn and I co-planned a unit with a group of seventh graders in a middle grades school in Madison, Wisconsin (Brodhagen, Weilbacher, & Beane, 1998). During the late 1980s and for much of the 1990s, progressive middle level advocates saw hope in the possibility that an integrative curriculum could replace the separate subject approach. In professional literature and at middle level conferences across the country, integrative curriculum was receiving attention. While far from being universally accepted among middle level advocates, I think it is fair to say that a "movement" was taking place as people were talking about, writing about, and

actually doing integrative curriculum in middle grade classrooms across the country.

Flash forward to today, and I see virtually no tangible evidence that a movement ever occurred. In my work as a student-teacher supervisor and Schools to Watch evaluator, I spend a great deal of time in public school classrooms throughout Illinois. If the presence of student voice and student/teacher collaboration are hallmarks of democratic schools, they are essentially non-existent in most of the schools I visit. While the majority of the schools I see have student councils, few have moved beyond planning dances and food drives by allowing students to voice concerns while participating on administrative teams. In addition, I see some schools promoting Problem-based Learning (PBL) and "genius hour" projects that allow students to study contemporary issues like global warming, food deserts, homelessness, immigration, and human trafficking. Such projects allow students to select and explore serious, substantive issues that help them become aware of the world around them. As valuable and progressive as these initiatives are, most lack the rich, participatory components of integrative curriculum. In conversations with teachers and administrators, the PBL events are described as powerful "add-ons" to the official curriculum – independent and small group activities that allowed students to pursue topics of interest, but it was clear that these activities were ancillary to the official curriculum. I also see occasional interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary units with themes like the Middle Ages, Ancient Egypt, and Westward Expansion. Units like these are generally planned by the teachers. While having the potential to show students how disciplines are related, they usually do little to provide voice to student concerns and encourage them to think critically about the world and their place within it.

In addition to experiencing classrooms dominated by teacher-centered instruction, I see corporate software products like Amplify and Digits that put young adolescents in front of "one-to-one" laptops, in an effort to "personalize" their learning while, ironically, requiring everyone to meet the same state-mandated standards. While there are benefits to such curricula, (especially for the companies that produce them) it is a major stretch to suggest that these programs promote the kinds of democratic principles that help students become informed citizens. My experiences also tell me that the students are not exactly enamored with these programs, as on more than one occasion I have seen them literally stand up and cheer when the student-teacher I was observing tell them that 'we won't be using Amplify today'.

So why is it that in the 30 years since first using integrative curriculum, the only place I can find something resembling the process is in a tiny private school that is really not much larger than most classrooms? In his article, Jim mentions a number of 'internal' barriers to creating democratic schools: the sorting and competitive nature of schooling; the "messiness" of democracy; school as preparation for consumers and producers; the perceived loss of teacher control; and the autocratic tendencies of teachers (this is my classroom) that prevent co-planning among students and teachers.

Such conditions are absent at Oak Ridge. The size of Oak Ridge may have inherent advantages for supporting democratic practices. It seems easier to implement democratic practices among three like-minded educators than it is to try to build a philosophical consensus among a faculty of 20 or more. The school is only three years old; meaning the power of the historical curriculum (think sorting, competition, and segregated subject areas) does not influence or restrict instructional practices and administrative procedures. Oak Ridge faculty have a flexible schedule and are accountable only to each other and their students, allowing them to engage in the "messiness" of democracy. Because the teachers are not subjected to outside influences and administrative pressure to increase test scores or meet standards, they have the freedom to value their students as people, rather than as potential test scores. Much of the teaching at Oak Ridge consists of helping students to understand how to negotiate, build consensus, and compromise, rather than focusing primarily on academic content.

This is not to imply that conflict and barriers are non-existent. What I found interesting during my sabbatical was that as I got to know each teacher, they all expressed internal struggles regarding democratic teaching, as much of what they were doing at Oak Ridge conflicted with how they were taught as students. Therefore, while the structures and concurrent pressures aligned with the historical curriculum were essentially non-existent, the teachers still felt tension between their own educational histories,

how they were taught, and how they in turn teach their students.

An additional important factor in understanding Oak Ridge is the generally unified beliefs of the people involved in the school. The students and families who attend the school are actively seeking an educational alternative to the local versions of schooling. To a large degree, this search for something different is driven by finding a safe place for children who have been underserved or marginalized by their previous schools. Having students and families who are open to a different kind of education provides a high degree of trust and support for the teachers. Along these lines, because the teachers themselves are members of the Oak Ridge board of directors, shared governance provides an internal layer of supportive, democratic practice that is often unavailable in public schools that tend to be more bureaucratic. The board itself is an interesting mix of self-described anarchists, socialists, and political activists – in other words, people who are committed to alternative forms of education that counter the educational, social, and political status quo. The end result is having a community that values democratic principles and removes some rather significant barriers for implementing an education that promotes student choice and empowerment.

I wish that I could honestly say that I believe that many of the Oak Ridge practices and philosophies could be implemented into public schools. Instead, what I believe is that there would need to be major changes in the schools I visit. Conversations about data walls, curriculum-based measures, MAP scores, and standards-based grading would need to be replaced by discussions about shared governance, student empowerment and the value of peer and self-assessment. Perceptions of the purposes of the disciplines of knowledge would need to shift from simply learning content to preparing for an unpredictable future to teaching students how to use disciplinary knowledge and processes to explore issues and discover possible solutions to problems that matter to kids and adults today.

The first heading in Jim's paper is entitled "IMAGINING a Democratic School." I feel fortunate that I no longer have to imagine a democratic school, as I spent the better part of six months working in one at Oak Ridge. What is left to my imagination is wondering what it will take to restart conversations about the need for democracy in schools. In looking at the Middle Grades Review website, interest in Jim's article seems significant, as it is listed on the popular articles page. Maybe Volume 5, Issue 3 of the Middle Grades Review can help to ignite another movement among middle level advocates. It seems as if we are long overdue for that.

References

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